DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 925 HE 036 150

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TITLE	Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Distance Education Courses. Research Report 2002-02.
INSTITUTION	Boise State Univ., ID. Office of Institutional Assessment.
REPORT NO	BSU-RR-2002-02
PUB DATE	2002-04-00
NOTE	13p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Faculty; *Distance Education; Higher Education; Incentives; *Satisfaction; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Boise State University ID

ABSTRACT

Distance education (DE) is a growing enterprise at Boise State University, Idaho. This study sought to learn more about faculty who taught DE courses, including their reasons for teaching DE classes, rewards and disincentives for DE courses, satisfaction, pedagogical issues, and levels of effort required. Questions were addressed through a survey distributed to all full-time faculty and some randomly selected adjunct faculty. Responses were received from 254 faculty members, about 30% of the faculty. Faculty had multiple reasons for teaching DE courses, with the most common being that they enjoyed trying new things and they believed the classes benefited the students. Faculty members reported both rewards and disincentives to teaching DE courses. Increased flexibility of scheduling and opportunities to learn and apply new and upcoming technologies and teaching approaches were the most commonly reported rewards. The most frequently reported disincentive was that teaching DE courses took significantly more time and error than teaching traditional courses, and faculty reported lack or recognition or financial compensation for the extra effort and instructional challenges of the delivery method. Overall, however, faculty were generally satisfied with teaching DE, and were satisfied with the training they had received. The major stumbling block to DE at Boise State appeared to be the preparation time for DE courses. (SLD)

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Institutional Assessment
Boise State University

Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Distance Education Courses

Research Report 2002 - 02
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Boise State University
April 2002

Abstract

Distance education (DE) is a growing enterprise at Boise State University. The number of distance education classes and students has doubled in the past five years. The pace of growth seems to be accelerating further as students request more distance education courses (especially over the internet) and the university undertakes a grant to deliver core courses via the internet.

This study sought to learn more about the faculty who taught DE courses including their reasons for teaching DE classes, rewards and disincentives of DE courses, satisfaction with courses, pedagogical issues, and levels of effort required. Questions were addressed through a survey distributed in Spring 2001 to all full-time faculty and some randomly selected adjunct faculty. About 30% responded to the survey. Although the study covered faculty who taught via all distance education delivery methods, about two-thirds of the respondents taught their courses through the internet.

Faculty had multiple reasons for teaching distance education courses. The most common reasons were they enjoyed trying new things and that they believed that the classes benefited students.

Faculty members reported many rewards and incentives to teaching distance education courses. Increased flexibility with scheduling and opportunities to learn and apply new and upcoming technologies and teaching approaches were the most commonly reported.

Faculty members also said that there were disincentives to teaching distance education courses. The most frequently reported disincentive was that teaching DE courses took significantly more time and effort than teaching traditional courses. Other disincentives included lack of recognition and/or financial compensation for the extra effort required and instructional challenges caused by the delivery method, in particular decreased interaction between students and faculty.

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Despite these disincentives, faculty reported being generally satisfied with teaching distance education courses. They were most satisfied with the training for faculty in using the delivery method, the technical support for faculty and with the facilities. They were least satisfied with the student skill at using the delivery method and the technical support for students.

Faculty reported that many of the students' course-related behaviors were the same in distance education classes as in traditional classes. There was strong agreement, however, that DE students were more likely to search for an answer rather than ask the instructor and tell the instructor that they had a complaint about the course. They were less likely to ask for clarification and discuss the ideas and concepts with the instructor than students taking traditional classes. This indicates that there might be less interaction between students and the instructor in DE classes than in traditional classes.

There were also differences in many of the student academic behaviors according to the delivery method. Faculty reported that students taking classes via the internet were more likely than students taking other DE courses to: ask for clarification when they didn't understand; indicate that they enjoyed the course; search for answers rather than ask the instructor and discuss ideas and concepts of the course with the instructor. This indicates that the level of interaction between faculty and students is higher in internet courses than in the other DE courses.

Faculty members reported that it takes more effort to prepare for a distance education course for the first time and in subsequent semesters than preparing for a course for direct classroom delivery. Preparing an internet class for the first time was reported as requiring even more effort than preparing classes for the first time using the other delivery methods. The differences in the level of effort between the delivery methods disappeared though when preparing DE courses in subsequent semesters.

Findings from this study indicate that many faculty consider distance education to be an effective and satisfying method of instruction. The major stumbling block is the preparation time for distance education courses.

Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Distance Education Courses

Distance education is a growing method of instructional delivery at Boise State University. As previously reported (RR 2000-03), the number of distance education courses, enrollments, and credits produced have more than doubled in the past five years. Internet courses have shown especially explosive growth.

As requests for distance education classes continue to increase, it is imperative to find and retain faculty to teach these courses. It is also important to know whether teaching distance education classes requires special attention in the areas of faculty support and satisfaction. Furthermore, as instruction moves from direct student contact in a classroom setting to contact via technology and/or at a satellite location, it is valuable to determine potential stumbling blocks and their implications for instruction and learning in distance education classes.

Purpose of the study

The study was designed to address the following questions:

1. Who is teaching distance education?
2. What types of distance education delivery methods are faculty members employing?
3. Why do faculty members teach distance education courses?
4. What are the rewards and/or disincentives to teaching distance education courses?
5. What is the faculty's level of satisfaction with various aspects of distance education?
6. What are the characteristics, if any, in different academic disciplines that encourage or discourage the use of distance education?
7. Which aspects of the course, if any, did faculty have to change in moving from face-to face, in-class delivery of instruction to delivery via distance education?
8. Do faculty members report that students exhibit similar behaviors in their distance education courses as they do in classes that relied primarily on paper and pencil assignments and face-to-face lectures and discussions (e.g., ask for clarification, search for an answer rather than ask the instructor, apply learning to the "real world")?
9. Do faculty report that there is a difference in the level of effort required to teach a distance education course compared to a traditional course?
10. Do the answers to the above questions differ depending on the method of delivery of the distance education course?

Methodology

Based on input from a small group gathered to identify questions that needed to be addressed in distance education, a survey for faculty teaching distance education classes was developed (see Appendix A for a copy of the survey). The group consisted of Janet Atkinson, Director of Distance Education; Stan Brings, Associate Dean, College of Applied Technology; David Cox, Associate Professor, Instructional and Performance Technology; Jim Girvan, Associate Dean, College of Health Sciences; Ben Hambelton, Director of the Simplot-Micron Instructional Technology Center; Joyce Harvey-Morgan, Dean of Extended Studies; Lamont Lyons, Professor, Foundations, Technology, and Secondary Education; Larry Reynolds, Professor, Economics; and Shelton Woods, Associate Professor, History. The group was facilitated by

Marcia Belcheir, Coordinator of Institutional Assessment. Some items were modified from a bank of items available through the Flashlight Project, an endeavor sponsored by the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) with the purpose of promoting the evaluation of distance education.

The survey was sent in the spring of 2001 to approximately 600 full-time faculty and to a random sample of 200 out of 800 adjunct faculty. A total of 254 useable responses were received for a response rate of about 30%.

In order to compare instructional delivery methods, faculty members were asked to identify which delivery method(s) they used to teach their distance education classes: (a) telecourses, (b) Knowledge Network and cable television (KNet), (c) Higher Education network, (d) internet, (e) radio, (f) distance learning network (DLN), or (g) videotape. However, because of the predominance of internet instruction, comparisons were made between the internet and all other forms of distance education.

Results

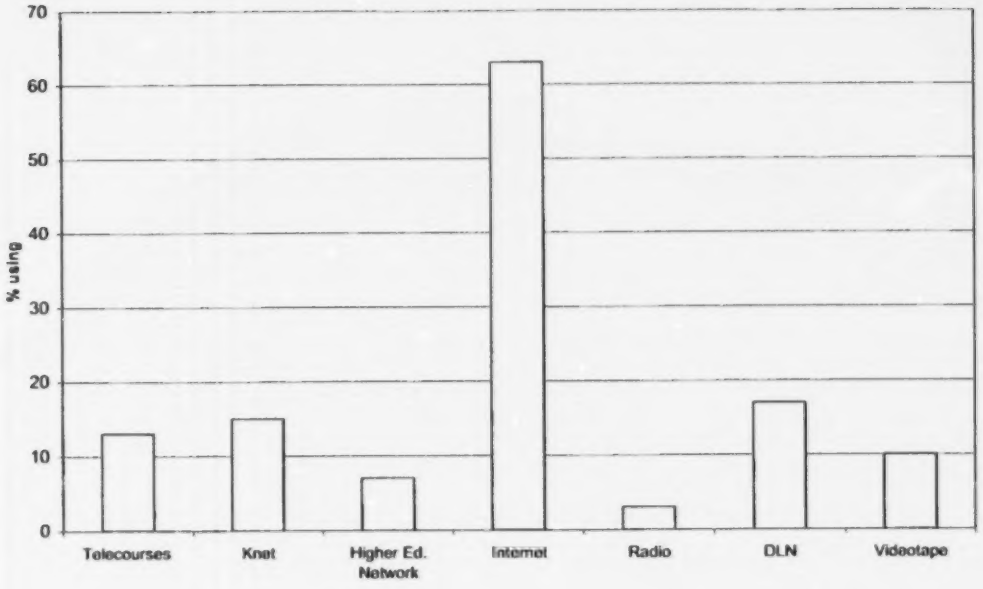
Who taught distance education courses?
Of the 254 respondents, 59 faculty members (23%) reported that they had taught at least one distance education class. It is probably an overestimation, however, to conclude that almost one-fourth of the faculty has taught distance education courses. Faculty who have been involved in distance education were probably more likely to complete and return the survey than faculty who haven't taught distance education classes, thereby inflating the percentage of faculty teaching distance education classes.

There were no statistically relevant differences in the age, gender nor academic rank of faculty respondents teaching distance education courses. Faculty members who taught distance education courses did not appear to be confined to a particular segment of the faculty.

Based on the results from this survey, the colleges with the highest percentages of faculty teaching distance education courses were the College of Business and Economics and the College of Health Sciences. The Colleges of Applied Technology and Arts & Sciences had the smallest percentage of faculty teaching distance education courses. Again, we must be careful to differentiate between survey results and actual records of involvement in distance education. According to Janet Atkinson, Director of Distance Education, about 30% of the instructors who taught distance education courses were from Arts and Sciences, while about 20% came from Health Sciences or Social Sciences and Public Affairs. The smallest percentage came from the College of Business and Economics--the group with the largest percentage of involvement in distance education on this survey.

What types of distance education delivery methods are faculty members employing?
The internet was the most commonly reported delivery method, with two-thirds of the faculty reporting teaching internet courses (See Figure 1). The use of other delivery methods ranged from 17% of the faculty using DLN distance learning network to 3% using radio. A total of 23% of the faculty taught distance education courses using more than one type of delivery method.

Figure 1. Percentages of faculty using various delivery methods



Why do faculty members teach distance education courses?
Faculty members most frequently responded that they taught distance education courses because they liked trying new things (57%) and they felt it benefited their students (45%). Faculty members also said that that they taught distance education courses because they were requested to (33%), they received additional funding (20%), because it was their turn (8%), and for "other reasons" (23%).

Most of the "other" reasons for teaching distance education courses fell into one of two categories: benefits for students and benefits for faculty and/or the department. The most commonly reported student benefit was that distance education courses reached students outside of Boise State's typical service area. The most common faculty benefit related to the amount of time saved by not having to go elsewhere to teach students.

What are the rewards and incentives for participating in distance education?
Most of the rewards and incentives for participating in distance education fell into one of three categories: faculty benefits, student benefits, and course benefits.

The largest category of rewards and incentives related to the ways that teaching distance education courses benefited faculty. Increased flexibility with scheduling and the opportunities to learn and apply new and upcoming technologies and teaching approaches were the benefits most often reported. Some faculty members also said that compensation in time and money and increased efficiency in running the course were incentives for teaching distance education courses.

The next largest category of rewards and incentives included ways that distance education courses benefited students. Faculty members reported that distance education courses gave students greater scheduling flexibility and increased access to classes for students who might not be able to enroll in on-campus courses.

Most of the remaining rewards and incentives related to the ways that distance delivery improved the quality of the course. Some faculty members said that distance education courses provided a greater diversity of students, more student interaction and participation, and more variety in institutional/learning tools used (i.e. video, music and technology).

What are the disincentives for participating in distance education?
Most of the disincentives for participating in distance education related to the challenges that faculty members faced when teaching distance education courses. The majority of these disincentives fell into one of three categories: increased time and effort; lack of support for faculty; and instructional challenges caused by the delivery method.

The increased time and effort required to teach distance education courses was the most commonly reported disincentive. Faculty members said that preparing, delivering and maintaining distance education courses required significantly more time and effort than traditional courses. The remaining disincentives were equally divided between the lack of support for teaching distance education courses and instructional challenges caused by the delivery method.

In the lack of support category, the most frequently reported disincentive related to the lack of, or inadequate compensation and/or recognition for the extra time and effort required to teach distance education courses. Some faculty members said that teaching distance education courses took time away from activities, such as researching and publishing, that are rewarded and given greater consideration for tenure and promotion. In the remaining responses in this category, faculty reported needing better technology and more technical support.

In the last category of disincentives, responses related to the instructional challenges caused by the delivery method. Among these responses, the most commonly reported disincentive was limited faculty-student interactions and student- student interactions. Some faculty members said that it was harder to get to know their students and build community in distance education courses. Other instructional challenges included difficulties presenting concepts and evaluating student learning in distance education courses.

How satisfied are faculty members with different aspects of teaching distance education courses?
Faculty members were generally satisfied with the aspects of teaching distance education classes that they were asked to rate (See Table 1). Mean ratings were close to or above 3.0 for most items (where a "3" indicated they were "somewhat satisfied" and a "4" indicated they were very satisfied). They were generally satisfied with the administrative support, equipment needed and the ability to teach using the delivery method. They were most satisfied with the training for faculty using the delivery method, the technical support for faculty and the facilities. Faculty members were least satisfied with the student skill at using the delivery method and the technical support for students.

Table 1. Faculty satisfaction with aspects of distance education delivery and support (N=60)

		Percent who were:			
Aspect being rated:	Mean Response	1- Very Dissatisfied	2- Somewhat Dissatisfied	3- Somewhat Satisfied	4- Very Satisfied
Training for faculty in using delivery method	3.04	5.36	14.29	46.43	33.93
Administrative support	2.65	19.64	21.43	42.86	16.07
Technical support for faculty	3.01	3.57	19.64	48.21	28.57
Technical support for students	2.55	15.69	29.41	35.29	19.61
Equipment needed	2.80	7.41	27.78	37.04	27.78
Ability to teach using this delivery method	2.83	5.56	24.07	46.30	24.07
Student skill at using delivery method	2.54	11.32	35.85	41.51	11.32
Facilities	3.00	5.66	18.87	45.28	30.19

What characteristics or values of the discipline work well with or encourage the use of distance education in the course delivery?

Three-fourths of the faculty members responded that there were characteristics or values of their discipline that worked well or encouraged the use of distance education for course delivery. When asked to elaborate on those characteristics or values, some faculty said that distance education courses provided students with experiences and knowledge that were directly related to their work or field of study. Other faculty members reported that distance education courses provided students with a wide variety of activities and sources of information.

Some faculty members reported the courses with cognitive goals and non-lab courses were the most appropriate to teach via distance education. The types of activities that were reported as working well via distance education include: teamwork, reflective discussions, critical thinking, writing, homework and quizzes.

What characteristics or values of the discipline discourage the use of distance education in course delivery?

Again, three-fourths of the faculty members said that there were characteristics or values of their discipline that discouraged the use of distance education as a delivery method. The majority of these values or characteristics related to the experiential or hands-on aspects of the disciplines.

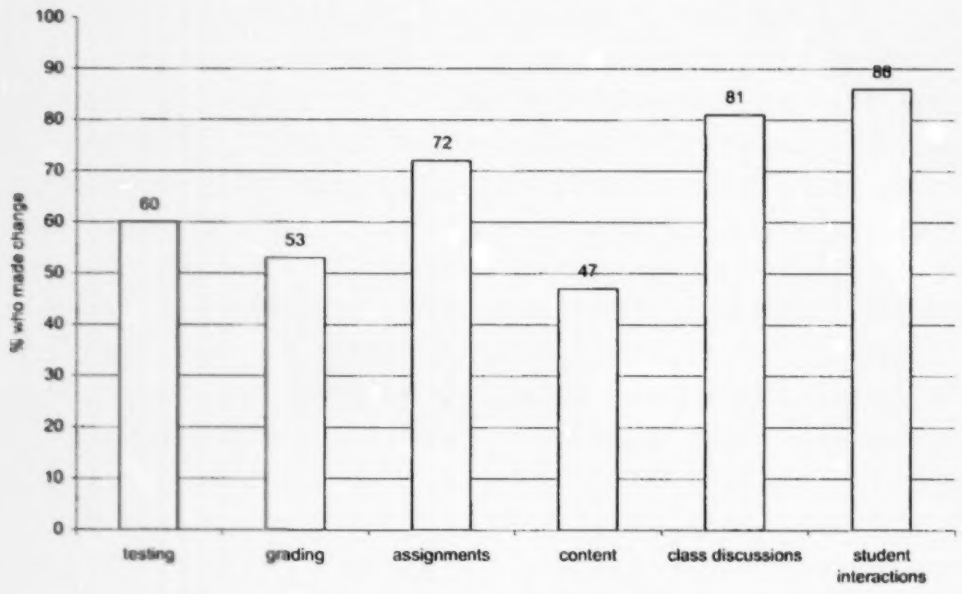
The types of courses that did not lend themselves to distance education were courses that required labs, fieldwork, clinical experiences and live demonstrations and cases. Teaching psychomotor skills via distance education was also reported as ineffective. Some faculty

members said that their courses needed more in-person, one-on-one interaction and group discussions than distance education could provide.

Which aspects of the course, if any, did faculty have to change?

When changing a course from in-class to distance delivery, faculty members more often reported needing to change the processes of the course rather than the content of the course. Class discussions and student interactions were the areas that most often needed to be changed. According to at least 50% of the faculty, other course processes such as testing practices, student assignments and grading practices also needed to be changed. The content of the course was the aspect that faculty least often changed. (See Figure 2 for details.

Figure 2. Percentages of faculty who made course changes



Did students' academic behaviors change in the distance education environment?
To gauge possible educational benefits and/or challenges of distance education courses, faculty members were asked to compare the academic behaviors of students in distance education classes to the academic behaviors of students in more traditional classes, i.e. classes that relied primarily on paper and pencil assignments, face-to-face lectures and discussions.

As shown in Table 2, a majority of the faculty reported that distance education students were about as likely as students in traditional classes to apply what they had learned to "real world" problems and indicate that they enjoyed the course. While 50% of the faculty reported that distance education students were about as likely to apply what they had learned to the real world, a significant number of the faculty (30%) thought that distance education students were more likely apply their learning and only a small percentage (7%) thought that they were less likely to do so.

Table 2. Comparison of distance education and traditional courses on student behavior (N=60)

Compared to traditional classes, how likely were students to:	Mean Response	1- Much less likely	2- Somewhat less likely	3- About the same	4- Somewhat more likely	5- Much more likely	0- N/A
Ask for clarification when they didn't understand something	2.66	25.00	25.00	20.00	16.67	11.67	1.67
Search for answers to your questions rather than ask you	3.40	5.17	15.52	27.59	39.66	10.34	1.72
Apply what they had learned to "real world" problems.	3.57	3.57	7.14	50.00	19.64	10.71	8.93
Discuss the ideas and concepts of the course with you	2.78	21.67	28.33	13.33	18.33	15.00	3.33
Indicate that they enjoyed the course	2.96	8.33	23.33	45.00	16.67	3.33	3.33
Tell you that they had a complaint about the course	3.51	1.72	15.52	32.76	39.66	8.62	1.72

Several differences in academic behaviors, however, were apparent. Faculty said that students taking distance education classes were more likely than students in traditional classes to search for answers rather than ask the instructor and tell the instructor that they had a complaint about the course. On the other hand, distance education students were less likely to ask for clarification and discuss the ideas and concepts with the instructor compared to students who had face-to-face contact with the instructor.

Does preparing a distance education course for the first time take more effort?

A total of 93% of faculty responded that preparing a distance education course for the first time took more effort than preparing a course for direct classroom delivery for the first time. A majority of those respondents (63%) reported that distance education courses required substantially more effort.

Of the faculty who taught distance education classes in subsequent semesters (60% of the group), a large majority of them (82%) responded that preparing distance education courses in subsequent semesters continued to require more effort than preparing direct classroom delivery courses in subsequent semesters.

Are there differences by delivery method?
Levels of faculty satisfaction with various aspects of distance education differed significantly by delivery method in only one of the rated aspects: the "ability to teach using this method." Faculty members who taught internet classes reported being more satisfied with their ability to teach using the delivery method than were faculty who taught using the other delivery methods.

Faculty perceived, however, several differences in students' academic behaviors in the different delivery methods. Faculty reported that students taking internet classes were more likely than students taking the other distance education courses to: ask for clarification when they didn't understand; indicate that they enjoyed the course; search for answers rather than ask the instructor; and discuss ideas and concepts of the course with the instructor.

As stated earlier, a majority of the faculty members said that preparing a distance education course for the first time required substantially more effort than preparing a course for direct classroom delivery for the first time. Preparing an internet class for the first time was reported as requiring even more effort than preparing other distance education courses for the first time. However, although a majority of the faculty who taught distance education courses in subsequent semesters reported that preparing distance education courses continued to require more effort, the differences in the levels of effort between the delivery methods disappeared.

Summary and Conclusions

To accommodate the growing interest in and requests for distance education classes, it is crucial to recruit and retain faculty to teach distance education courses. This study was designed to assess faculty perceptions of distance education from the point of view of those who have or are currently teaching distance education courses. The study sought to answer questions about faculty background, reasons for teaching distance education classes, rewards and disincentives of distance education courses, satisfaction with courses, pedagogical issues, and levels of effort required. Although the study covered faculty who taught via all distance education delivery methods, about two-thirds of the respondents taught their courses through the internet.

Faculty members who taught distance education courses did not appear to be confined to a particular segment of the faculty. However, the findings of this survey may be more reflective of the faculty who responded to the survey rather than of all faculty teaching distance education courses.

Faculty had multiple reasons for teaching distance education courses. The most common reasons were that they enjoyed trying new things and that they believed that the classes benefited students. Faculty members reported many rewards and incentives to teaching distance education courses. Increased flexibility with scheduling and opportunities to learn and apply new and upcoming technologies and teaching approaches were the most commonly reported rewards and incentives.

Faculty members also reported that there were disincentives to teaching distance education courses. The most frequently reported disincentive was that teaching distance education courses took significantly more time and effort than teaching traditional courses. The other main disincentives were the lack of recognition and/or financial compensation for the extra effort required and the instructional challenges caused by the delivery method, in particular the decreased interaction between students and faculty.

Despite the above-mentioned disincentives, faculty reported being generally satisfied with teaching distance education courses. Faculty members were most satisfied with the training for faculty in using the delivery method, the technical support for faculty and with the facilities. Faculty teaching via the internet reported being the most satisfied with their ability to teach using the delivery method. Maintaining a high level of faculty support and training would therefore be beneficial. Faculty members were least satisfied with the student skill at using the delivery method and the technical support for students. Thus, it could be helpful to improve and/or increase the training and support available to students.

Faculty members reported about as many characteristics or values of their discipline that encouraged the use of distance education as those that discouraged its use. Courses that provided real-world, practical experience, perhaps for more technology-oriented fields, encouraged the use of distance education delivery methods. Courses that required hands-on experiences and taught psychomotor skills discouraged the use of distance education delivery methods.

When changing a course from in-class to distance education delivery, faculty more often reported changing processes rather than the content of the course. Class discussions and interactions with students were the aspects most often changed.

Faculty reported that many of the students' behaviors were the same in distance education classes as in traditional classes. There was agreement, however, that distance education students were more likely to search for an answer than ask the instructor and to tell the instructor that they had a complaint about the course. They were less likely to ask for clarification and discuss the ideas and concepts with the instructor than students taking traditional classes. This indicates that there might be less interaction between students and the instructor in distance education classes than in traditional classes and parallels the findings from the student survey of distance education (see Research Report 2001-04).

There were also differences in many of the student academic behaviors in the different methods. Faculty reported that students taking classes via the internet were more likely than students taking other distance education courses to: ask for clarification when they didn't understand; indicate that they enjoyed the course; search for answers rather than ask the instructor and discuss ideas and concepts of the course with the instructor. This indicates that the level of interaction between faculty and students is higher in internet courses than in the other distance

education courses, a finding that was first seen in the results of the student survey of distance education (see Research Report 2001-04).

Interaction between faculty and students in distance education courses was an aspect that repeatedly appeared in the findings of this study. While some faculty said that interaction and participation was increased by the distance delivery method, a majority of the responses indicated that interaction was decreased or hindered in distance education courses. Further research into which delivery methods and/or activities encourage interaction could benefit the faculty and students and improve the quality of distance education courses.

Faculty members reported that it takes more effort to prepare for a distance education course for the first time and in subsequent semesters than preparing for a course for direct classroom delivery. Preparing an internet class for the first time was reported as requiring even more effort than preparing classes for the first time using the other delivery methods. The differences in the level of effort between the delivery methods disappeared though when preparing distance education courses in subsequent semesters.

The extra time and effort needed to prepare and teach a distance education course was also a theme occurring throughout the study. As budget constraints loosen, lightening the workload of faculty who teach distance education courses could help compensate for the extra time and effort needed to teach distance education courses. Additionally, looking into ways to improve compensation and recognition for teaching distance education courses could help recruit and retain faculty to teach distance education courses.

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